

RUNNING SHOES

By Rick Barrett

I. Literary Background of USA

American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the Indian cultures. The earliest American writings were concerned directly with the dream of a new world, and mostly accounts of pioneering motives and settlements were published.

Regional literature has always been important in the United States. Until the end of the 19th century, American literature was dominated by the works of New Englanders, such as Cotton Mather. Sermons and religious tracts provided the greatest part of the writing. The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced. Puritan style varied enormously -- from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and religious history.

The 18th-century American Enlightenment was a movement marked by an emphasis on rationality rather than tradition, scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious dogma, and representative government in place of monarchy. Enlightenment thinkers and writers were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man. Benjamin Franklin, whom the Scottish philosopher David Hume called America's "first great man of letters," embodied the Enlightenment ideal of humane rationality.

In the second half of the 19th century, the United States was transformed into a modern, industrial nation. As industrialization grew, so did alienation. Characteristic American novels of the period, for example by Stephen Crane and Jack London, depict the damage of economic forces and alienation on the weak or vulnerable individual. Survivors, like Mark Twain's Huck Finn, endure through inner strength involving kindness, flexibility, and, above all, individuality.

Although American prose between the two World Wars experimented with viewpoint and form, Americans such as Ernest Hemingway, wrote more realistically, on the whole, than did Europeans. William Faulkner set his powerful southern novels firmly in Mississippi heat and dust. The importance of facing reality became a dominant theme in the 1920s and 1930s: Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald repeatedly portrayed the tragedy awaiting those who live in flimsy dreams.

II. ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

RICK BARRETT was featured in Best American Gay Fiction, deemed as an anthology of "poignant, provocative, and nostalgic stories that represent some of the most remarkable writing in the U.S. today." Barrett worked for the Michigan Treasury for 30 years and wrote two novels. His story "Running Shoes" dramatically portrays the distance between father and son and how the tragedy of AIDS brought these two "strangers" together.

III. SUMMARY:

I am a man who, having failed at business, marriage, and fatherhood, lives in a mobile home with myself and my second and final wife, my Helen. She will stay, i know, because of time and because of Todd, my son, who is gone. I am clumsy with speech. Spoken words make me nervous, cautious. People expect them to make sense, to carry truth. When i speak i am startled by the chasm between what i think and the words that fumble from me.

I see now that Todd became a man at 18 as i had, when he ran away from home. We were behind the house, laying up a cord of wood for the winter, something we did every August in the high heat of summer. There was, he had told me, an art school in New York that would take him, "That," I told him, "I cannot support. Paint if you want. A hobby or something. In your spare time. But first do something to support yourself."

I could not know then that his work would be considered brilliant in circles, that he would make money, that he would paint only at night and only when he was high, that his work would show in galleries. Now, whenever I see something of his work, the only sense it makes to me is that it makes no sense at all.

He didn't come home again until he was 28. Ten round years. I had lost my business, my house, Todd's mother to divorce, a lung to cancer, the habit of liquor. Helen was my nurse when i lost the lung, sturdy and firm, and intent on finding someone to fix. That was enough to make me love here then and still.

Todd stood at the door, the ten years and more between us, the red heat in his face from having run five miles. He did not look like a son i would have. His hair was wild, big, a tumble of brown corkscrews reaching his shoulders. He had driven here - 2,000 miles - following a message i had left on his phone machine, " I guess it's been ten years, i have a new wife. This is your father. Not new anymore. Maybe you would think about coming for Christmas."

He would know the smallness of my life, how petty my past, that the greatest i had done was fail at being his father. What i would know later was that he was gay and had been sick.

Todd sat in Helen's chair, his legs crossed, one foot kicking at the air. Todd pulled a bandanna from his hair and wipe at the sweat on his forehead. After watching movies together, he went out and i followed him. "I was sick last year, dad," he said. "And, you're telling me you're gay, aren't you?." "That isn't really the point," he said. "It is a point." I pressed my fingers against my thighs, down toward my knees, grabbing them. "Are you sick now?"

"It never goes away, all the way. I had pneumonia. I was in the hospital. I got better. This time I'm back to running a little," he said. I asked him if his alone in New York, Manhattan, he whispered, "Yes, but i have friends, but I have no Helen." I asked him, "What about Nick?"

And he said, "He died. He was always only a friend. Not only a friend-my only bestfriend since i was seven." I thought of having no Helen, and began to know that Todd feared this aloneness more than this sickness. This tide rising inside him.

By the time Todd turned nine, I slapped him hard and once across the face, when I saw his room painted with his feelings to Nick. His obviously turning to a girl's heart. Todd stared into my eyes, his tears defiant and silent.

When I woke up the next morning Helen had already gone, and the notion of filling up a day for and with Todd frightened me.

In the three days before Christmas, I bought him books on running, running shorts, shirts, a journal. I bought him a book of runners' recipes. Running became the one thing I knew about him that was so safe to ask, a thing for which doing homework brought no fear.

I see now that our zeal for his running, both his and mine, was also about fear. I feared Todd would stop running because he could run no longer, because he had fallen sick again, too sick to run. And Todd, I imagine, feared the same. I thought that to engage him in his running, to encourage him in it, might perpetuate the running, him.

I would be able to divine, perhaps because I am his father - no matter that I was inept or absent much of his life - Todd's reaction to my gift the moment the lid came off the box. Todd simply stared at the shoes, his face naked from discovery, his eyes pooling and blinking, and slowly plucked away the tissue paper.

The looming regret I have about life is that there are stationary fronts, banks of cloud between fathers and sons, between men, between a man and himself. Because of this I had no idea how to touch him then, he in his new shoes, I sitting, staring lamely at a gift I can't recall. Now that he is gone, I have no idea how to bear having failed at this, the knowledge of how to stand and hold on to my one son.

IV. ELEMENTS OF THE STORY:

Conflict of the story - Man vs. Man, Man vs. Himself

Point of View - The story is told from the first person point of view, using the pronoun "I"

Theme - The central theme of running shoes is that the son, Todd and the father are RUNNING away from the fact that Todd is still healthy and not sick of HIV/AIDS. It is not directly stated in the short story that Todd is sick.

Setting – Korea, Christmas season

Characters - I (father), Todd (son), Helen (wife), Nick (friend)

Plot - Todd and his father did not see each other for almost ten years. Todd was 18 when he ran away from home. An after then his father failed at his business, marriage and fatherhood, living in a mobile home with his second and final wife, Helen. He lost his business, divorced with Todd's mother, a lung to cancer and a habit of liquor.

Todd loves painting but his father do not considered this as brilliant in circle; that this would make money: that he would paint only at night and only when he was high; that his work would show in galleries. And his father thought that it would make no sense at all.

Ten years after Todd came back home. His father did not recognize him because he had a wild hair, big, tumble of brown corkscrews reaching his shoulders. And he knew later that his son is a gay and had been sick and just finally he became understanding. Todd tells to his dad that he was sick last year and he had pneumonia. But he said that he got better and his back to running a little.

One morning his father went to his room and he saw two pairs of running shoes. He dressed as quickly as he could and was out of the trailer and he knew what to buy to his own grown son. And Todd likes it very much.

But after the death of his son he was full of regret, that there are stationary fronts, banks of clouds between fathers and sons, between men, between a man and himself. And now that his son is gone he have no idea how to bear having failed at this, the knowledge of how to stand and hold on to his one son.